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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 000329

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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS FORSYTH, AND DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [BX](#)
SUBJECT: A GLIMPSE OF BRUNEI STYLE DEMOCRACY

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On October 28, DCM and Pol/Mil Assistant observed the election for the Village Chief of Kampong Lumapas. Voters approved by a vote of 226 to 20 the single candidate placed on the ballot after official screening. GoB officials were disappointed at the low turnout, but noted than many such elections have similar turnouts, even on a contested ballot with two or three candidates. One member of a Brunei political party alleged that village chief elections were sham elections and that the favored candidate always won. We saw a technically primitive, but reasonably secure voting process that should be able to produce free and fair elections on a small scale. Brunei would need to considerably upgrade its voting system to accommodate elections for the Legislative Council.

A VILLAGE ELECTION

¶2. (U) About 300 residents gathered in Lumapas - a small village across the river from Bandar Seri Begawan - to cast their votes for the Village Chief of Lumapas Mukim 'A' in Brunei Muara district on Sunday, October 28. DCM and Pol/Mil Assistant observed the festive atmosphere at the assembly hall of a local school where villagers gathered to gossip, ignore the speeches of the visiting dignitaries, cast their votes, and enjoy a mid-morning meal of rice, chicken curry, and anchovy stew.

¶3. (U) Out of 1, 129 village residents, 533 Brunei citizens and permanent residents above the age of 18 were eligible to vote but not all registered for this election. Voters were required to present their national identity cards to vote, and their names were checked off on an alphabetical list of registered voters. Male and female voters were segregated and sent to registration tables on either side of the room. Registration was not allowed to take place on the Election Day; only pre-registered villagers were able to vote. The ballot papers were serialized, but there was no attempt to link ballot numbers to voters' identities. Ballots were marked in privacy booths and placed by the voters in padlocked, transparent ballot boxes. Although we were unable to stay for the vote count, we were informed that the ballot boxes would be opened in public view and counted on the spot after the 9-11:30 AM voting time window closed.

LOW TURNOUT

¶4. (SBU) Dato Paduka Haji Mohamed Yussop Bakar, District Officer (the appointed senior administrative official in each of Brunei's four districts) for Brunei Muara District, told us that he was disappointed with the residents' low level of participation in any elections. In his pre-voting speech to the voters, he stressed the importance of residents' responsibility to participate in the election of the Village Chief and hoped that residents would be more enthusiastic given the importance of the decision in electing a Village Chief. Dato Yussop told us that low turnout has long been a problem in many villages although he said that contested elections

tend to have slightly higher turnouts.

AND THE WINNER IS...

15. (SBU) Sixty-year old retired teacher Haji Yassin Hj Mohd Hassan was the only candidate and secured 226 votes in his favor (20 voted against him and 2 votes were disqualified). Haji Yassin told us that he did not run a campaign to garner any of the villagers' support as there was already a general consensus among the villagers to nominate him as a candidate for Lumapas Village Chief. According to District Officer Dato Yussop, Hj Yassin underwent security and political vetting and was interviewed for general suitability for the position prior to the election.

ELIGIBILITY TO BECOME VILLAGE CHIEF

16. (U) Under Brunei regulations and conventional practice, vacancies for Kampong (village) and Mukim (collection of villages) Chiefs are advertised in the government-owned, Malay language newspaper 'Pelita Brunei' two months prior to Election Day. Candidacy forms must be signed by a nominator and seconded by two persons (citizens or permanent residents only) and submitted to the Mukim and Kampong Institution Section of the District Office. Eligible candidates must be male Bruneian citizens between 30 to 60 years of age and have completed at least form 3 (equivalent to eighth grade) schooling. Candidates must have been residents of the village for at least two years, have no involvement in any associations deemed a threat to national security, nor have declared bankruptcy. Candidates must possess good leadership skills, knowledge of Islam, the community, and the customs & traditions practiced by the village

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residents. Civil servants and political party members must retire from these positions if appointed as village chiefs. Private businessmen may continue conducting their business under terms & conditions set by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Chiefs are elected for a term of five years which can be renewed without further election at the pleasure of the Sultan until the chief reaches the age of 65. Village chiefs monthly salary range is BND1,280 - 1,930 (USD860 - 1295).

17. (U) Solicitations for Mukim Chiefs are conducted in the same manner as Kampong Chiefs, but prospective candidates must be Muslim males between the ages of 40 and 60. Mukim chiefs are appointed by the Head of State (the Sultan). If a candidate was previously a Village Chief, he must have held that post for at least 5 years. The salary scale for Mukim Chief is BND1,990 - BND2,620 (USD1372 - USD1807).

COMMENT

18. (SBU) The voting process we observed was rudimentary, but not/technically flawed and could, with some technical assistance, be adequate to conduct free and fair elections on a larger scale. The Ministry of Home Affairs maintains control of the process through rigorous vetting of candidates for political suitability. One political party member alleged that there have been instances where the results of an election were adjusted by authorities to ensure that a favored candidate won. While we cannot independently verify this allegation, it is an indicator of the general disregard citizens have for the limited taste of democracy currently available in Brunei. The GoB will have to work hard to convince the public that elections are meaningful if and when Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah fulfills his pledge to hold direct elections for a minority of the seats on the Legislative Council.

FRIEDMAN